

Op-Ed: Gov. Wolf's Puzzling Vetoes Put Reform, Transparency in Jeopardy

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An Op-Ed by State Senator John C. Rafferty, Jr. (R-Montgomery)

When the two-year legislative session ended in November, Governor Wolf sent a loud and concerning message to Pennsylvanians by vetoing two important government reform bills and another bill designed to protect our police officers and their families.

These vetoes are not only disturbing but counter his campaign pledge to reform government. His actions beg the question—will the next two years of a Wolf administration bring more efforts to block reform legislation and policies that have strong bipartisan and widespread public support?

The governor vetoed legislation that would increase accountability, transparency and efficiency at the Delaware River Port Authority (DRPA). The DRPA has come under increasing scrutiny recently for its unacceptable practices, including its patronage hiring, lack of transparency, lavish perks, excessive spending and debt, and burdensome toll increases.

Senate Bill 286 received overwhelming legislative support. However, the governor decided to protect the status quo of corruption, mismanagement and nepotism at DRPA. His objection to the reforms was a provision for Senate confirmation of DRPA nominees who would become members of a board that has broad power and authority in addition to being entrusted with over \$300 million in tolls from hardworking citizens from Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

In the six years since I introduced this bill, serious issues regarding the DRPA nominees have arisen, including the governor's appointee Whitney White. An internet search of Mr. White illustrates why the governor would prefer to maintain the status quo and operate in the dark.

The public has a right to know the qualifications of these appointees, and, like other important nominations made by the governor, those people should be carefully vetted by the Senate. Executives with the DRPA have insisted this bill is not necessary and that changes have already been made; however, a Federal U.S. District Judge as recently as this September overturned a \$17.8 million contract award by DRPA citing their undocumented process that was obscured from public scrutiny. He called the process deeply and dramatically flawed and in need of substantial reform. The legislature placed a bill on the governor's desk to create meaningful reform of this board and our governor chose to keep the status quo.

In another stunning blow to good government, Governor Wolf vetoed House Bill 1618, which would have permanently established the Office of Inspector General in state law. It is unfathomable that someone who claims to support reform would oppose a plan to legislatively authorize an agency whose sole purpose is to identify and eliminate government waste. This office would be vitally important as a steward of good government practices in state government. There is no excuse for the governor's action.

Governor Wolf's flimsy justification mirrored his veto of the DRPA reform bill, where he opposed Senate confirmation of nominees – a requirement designed to ensure the independence of this important office charged with uncovering waste, fraud and abuse. His administration went so far as to refer to this reform as a "waste of time." Actions to protect taxpayer dollars are never a waste of time.

After thumbing his nose at government reform, Governor Wolf stunned the law enforcement community by vetoing House Bill 1538, which would have protected police officers involved in shootings and their families. In sponsoring the companion bill in the Senate, I wanted to ensure the identity of police officers involved in fatal shootings was secure until an official investigation is completed. The legislation contained specific timeframes regarding the investigation and required the name to be released if the officer was charged with a crime related to the shooting. The governor, *in a feeble attempt to justify his veto, claimed the bill lacked transparency. With the safety of police officers and their families at stake, it is ironic that the governor would veto a bill for lack of transparency and with the stroke of a different pen veto bills designed to increase transparency. Both vetoes are reprehensible.*

If officers are forced to discharge a firearm or use deadly force, they should be provided protection and respect for their families while an investigation is ongoing. This protection is afforded to private citizens in similar circumstances but not for police officers charged with maintaining the peace. Releasing identities prior to an investigation puts them at terrible risk for doing their jobs. The national media attention that accompanies these officer-involved shootings causes tremendous stress and attention on the officers and their families. In some instances, it causes officers to second guess their ability to do their jobs. Rather than stand with our police, our governor voluntarily chose to turn his back and, by doing so, he has left our first responders vulnerable.

Governor Wolf's ill-conceived and politically motivated veto of these three bills raises grave concerns about his commitment to real reform, transparency and public safety. The governor ran on a promise of a fresh start but has continually put partisan politics over good-government.

As we begin a new legislative session in January, I urge the governor to think hard about the promises he made to Pennsylvanians when running for office and to start putting their best interests ahead of his own agenda.